



Zika is among reasons many Americans skipping Rio Olympics

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RIO DE JANEIRO — The Olympic Games are still more than a month away, but the number of Americans expected to attend has plummeted over concerns about Brazil's insecurity, political instability and the ever-spreading Zika virus.

Original estimates had about 200,000 Americans expected to attend the Rio Games, but a senior U.S. official said that number is now closer to 100,000. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the issue.

Security contractors and U.S. companies say many people just don't feel comfortable spending weeks in Brazil with all the troubling news they've been hearing from the South American country.

"The majority of our members decided to skip the Games and not go, which is a really sad statement about the Olympics because they're a wonderful event," said **Dan Richards, CEO of Global Rescue**, a Boston-based firm that has provided security and logistics for Americans in previous Olympics. **"People are concerned, and their concerns are not unwarranted."**

Brazilian and Olympic officials stress that they're doing everything they can to ensure a safe experience for the 500,000 visitors expected to be in Rio during August's Games. The 85,000 civil and military police set to patrol the city are double the amount in London during the 2012 Games. And Brazil's health minister said last week that there is "almost zero risk" of contracting Zika in Rio since the Games will be played during South America's winter when the mosquito population is low.

Still, even some Brazilians understand why people would stay away.

"There is a joke that God is Brazilian, but he's going through an Old Testament phase," said Maurício Santoro, a political science professor at Rio de Janeiro State University. "Here's the Zika. Here's the corruption. Here's the recession. The only thing that hasn't happened are the locusts."

The primary concern mentioned by Americans so far has been the threat of Zika, the virus that originated in South America and has spread to the U.S. The virus causes microcephaly, which leads to abnormally small heads in newborns, and Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare condition that forces the body's immune system to attack its nervous system.

An official with Coca-Cola, one of the main sponsors of the Olympics, said they are closely following guidance from the World Health Organization and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention regarding the Zika threat in Rio. Kate Hartman, a spokeswoman for Coca-Cola, said they are encouraging their employees and partners to consult with their personal doctors before deciding to go.

"We will completely support our associates' decisions if they choose not to travel for medical reasons to any country where the Zika virus is found," Hartman said.

Officials with San Francisco-based Airbnb, an official supplier of the Games, added a page to its website with information on Zika with links to travel warnings and information on the virus.

"The safety of the Airbnb community is the single most important thing we work on every day," according to a statement. "We are focused on communicating the risks of the virus to our community, including our employees, while following the guidance issued by the WHO and CDC."

The dropoff of Americans visiting Rio is worrying to many Brazilians who were hoping to cash in on the rush of tourists.

Richard Ford, a retired FBI agent who now runs a private security firm in Sao Paulo, said he had lined up several Brazilian security teams to protect American clients during the Games, but many of those clients have backed out. He said other local companies have already bought fleets of armored cars and buses to ferry around visitors during the Games, but they are worried the cars will sit unused.

"The big sponsors, they're going to be there in force," Ford said. "But second and third-level sponsors have decided not to go or cut back their participation."

Chris Katsuleres, who has overseen GE's participation in the Olympics since the 2006 Winter Games in Torino, said the company expects to have about 100 people working in Rio and another 800 customers and staff attending the events. He said he hears concerns leading up to every round of the Olympics. And while he's getting more Zika-related questions this time around, he said he's confident Rio will pull it off.

"Every Games has challenges," Katsuleres said. "In some ways, that's consistent. But we look at each Games being different, each of the challenges. There's still a lot of work left to do, but I'm confident ... that the city is going to be able to push through and deliver a good Games."